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A FLASH OF COLOUR

Triumphant over hardship, CAROLINE DECHAMBY is taking the art world by storm, one colourful painting at a time. By LAUREN TAN

I AM NEITHER in a state of hallucination nor inebriation when I make this observation — Dutch artist Caroline Dechamby is everywhere.

She is in the corner, gazing into her painting of poppy flowers. A few feet away, she is applying masking tape to a piece titled *Scotch*. And there she is again, this time by the gallery window, where her silhouette is unmistakable against a chequered canvas.

Dechamby, you see, paints herself into her art. Not out of ego or vanity (because the real Dechamby is more vivacious than her overalls-wearing alter ego) but to make a statement about her resilience during personal hardship.

Predestined to be artistically inclined — her mother is a painter and her father an architect — Dechamby, a former fashion model, turned to painting full-time nearly two decades ago when her six-year-old daughter became violently ill and fell into a coma.

Painting was Dechamby's therapy. "I didn't even think of becoming a professional painter. I just painted because it made me feel better," she says. "It got me out of a difficult moment. That's why in my work, you always have [*the hyperrealist*] me looking into the painting, into the canvas."

Her technique, developed 10 years ago, is as intriguing as it is controversial. Subject matters, which run the gamut from vibrant flowers to comic strips, are first painted on canvas before a sheet of Plexiglas is affixed with stainless steel screws for a conceptual three-dimensional effect. It is on the Plexiglas that she paints in her likeness, a laborious process that may require up to seven successive coats of paint.

Each work of art is vividly-hued and cheery. "You can feel the good energy. I never paint dark subjects or the pessimistic," she says. In this regard, her mother, who paints predominantly in the Dutch naive style, is the influence. "I definitely got the bright colours from her."

Nature, flowers and butterflies have always featured heavily in Dechamby's art, inspired no doubt by the beauty of her adopted hometown, Crans-Montana in the Swiss Alps. But recently, there has been a discernible shift towards paying homage to the modern masters: Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, René Magritte et al. A number of these paintings — from her *Mise en Scène* series — recently travelled with her to Singapore for a gallery showing at luxury lifestyle purveyor E'Collezione. The exhibition, *Luxury à la Française & Contemporary Art*, also presented artworks by Ron Wood (guitarist of The Rolling Stones).



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Surrealist Magritte's thought-provoking sense of humour, especially his recurring theme of perfect blue skies and fluffy white clouds, is of particular influence to Dechamby's growth as an artist. "My mother actually painted Magritte's dove motif on our wall. I remember lying in bed as a seven or eight-year-old and looking at the painting," she says.

"But," she adds. "I never thought that I would one day make a living from art." As a child, observing her mother at work had only convinced her that painting was a solitary and lonely craft.

Her solution was to build a light-filled atelier beside her three-story art gallery in the ski resort town of Crans-Montana so that she could paint as well as interact with customers. "Painting is like an elite sport. You have to be very disciplined. I try to put in maybe eight hours every day but if I don't, I make up for it the next day."

Painting aside, Dechamby is also adding luxury products to her portfolio. A line of watches in her trademark aesthetic will be launched within a year under the eponymous Caroline Dechamby label.

Says the artist: "When my daughter was ill, my mother would say to me, 'Caroline, keep on painting. One day, another world will open for you.' And she was right." ■